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AUTHOR Gruner, Charles R.
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ABSTRACT

Listeners generally rate speakers of high initial ethos (such as university professors) using mildly self-deprecating humor highly on traits like "wittiness" and "funniness." A three-part study investigated whether a speaker of lower initial ethos (such as a student) can "get away" with such self-deprecation. In Experiment 1, college students read versions of a speech that varied by low versus high speaker ethos, and humor versus no humor, where the humor in the speech put down the professional field of the speaker and was "witty." Subjects rated both speaker types higher when humor was used. In Experiment 2, the ethos difference between speaker types was wider, the humor put down the speaker rather than the profession, and it was "humorous." Subjects rated these speakers lower for authoritativeness in the humor conditions. A different set of subjects rated the witty materials of Experiments 1 and 2 to confirm that the "childish" nature of the humor in the second experiment led to the lower authority rankings. Experiment 3 tested the effects of self- versus other-directed humor by having subjects read three speeches on choosing psychology as a career attributed to (1) a psychologist (self-deprecating humor), (2) an economist (other-directed humor), or (3) control (no humor). Subjects ranked both speakers using wit higher than the control speaker, which indicates that tasteful disparaging wit may be used successfully by speakers whether that wit disparages self or others. (SKC)

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SELF-AND OTHER-DISPARAGING WIT/HUMOR AND SPEAKER ETHOS: THREE EXPERIMENTS

Charles R. Gruner

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SELF-AND OTHER-DISPARAGING WIT/HUMOR AND SPEAKER ETHOS: THREE EXPERIMENTS
Paper, Fourth International Conference on Humor, Tel Aviv, June, '84

by Charles R. Gruner
The University of Georgia

Grimes[1] surveyed the theories of humor expounded by rhetorical and non-rhetorical writers and concluded that humor would seem to be of little value to a speaker. The only experimental study of the subject extant at that time was that by Lull,[2] which seemed to support her conclusion. Since then a small but growing number of experimental studies of wit/humor as communication have been conducted,[3] and show some positive effects. For instance, several studies show that a modicum of apt humor in informative discourse can enhance ratings of the speaker's "character,"[4] and that satire, a form of wit, can be effective as persuasion if the serious intent of the satirist is perceived by the audience. Satire's effects, further, are affected by auditor ego-involvement and salience to him of the satires's topic.[5] Although most studies fail to show that humor enhances short-term recall of lecture material, Kaplan and Pascoe[6] have demonstrated that humor used to illustrate informative points has a beneficial effect in long-term recall. Also, humor used over a long period of time may enhance learning significantly. Ziv[7] trained statistics teachers to teach their courses with and without a humorous approach; the humorous teaching resulted in an average of 15% better performance on objective exams.

Speech experts have disagreed on the use of self-deprecating humor, some saying that, if anyone is to be deprecated, it should be the speaker; others say that humorous self-deprecation by a speaker is likely to produce a negative audience reaction to the speaker. Stocking and Zillman[8] tested the hypothesis of self- versus other-deprecating humor and found that self-deprecating humor produced the most negative of audience response toward the speaker. However, the stimulus message used contained nothing but self-abusing humor, a tactic

that few speakers other than Rodney Dangerfield ("I don't get no respect") would try.

To test the hypothesis that the use of mildly self-deprecating wit directed at one's professional field would enhance certain audience reactions to a speaker without damaging the speaker's ethos, Chang and Gruner[9] exposed Ss to a printed speech supposedly either by an "economist" or a "psychologist." The "speeches" were directed at supposed college and college-bound students and explained why majoring in the speaker's field would be beneficial. Half of each set of speeches contained witty remarks deprecating either economics ("If all the economists in the world were laid end to end, they would still each point in a different direction") or psychology ("Psychologist: a man who would father twins, have one baptized, and keep the other for a control").

Students were randomly handed one of the four versions of the speeches. Each read the speech and then responded to measures of "sense of humor," "wittiness," and "funniness" (scales used by the author in earlier, published studies), as well as to the McCroskey ethos scales and the 6 semantic differential scales used by Stocking and Zillman. The data generally supported the idea that the speaker who uses mildly self-deprecating humor will be rated higher on "wittiness," "funniness," and "sense of humor," all desirable human qualities, and without damaging the more important factors of ethos, "character" and "authoritativeness." However, both "speakers" were of relatively high initial ethos (university professors), which suggested the question, Could a speaker of lower initial ethos (as, say, a student speaker) "get away" with such self-deprecation (that is, enhance part of his "image" without damage to ratings of his ethos). To investigate this question, the following study was conducted.

Experiment 1

Stimuli. The speech, "Why I chose Psychology," used in the Chang/Gruner study, served as the experimental and control versions of the stimulus. It was introduced as either by a low ethos source (high school senior planning to major in psychology in college) or a high ethos source (university psychology professor).

Subjects. University of Georgia students (speech) were randomly assigned to read and respond to one of the four speeches. Twenty-six Ss read the low ethos/no humor speech; 22 read the low ethos/humor speech; 25 read the high ethos/no humor speech; and 25 read the high ethos/humor version.

Response Measures. The speech and speaker were rated on several scales (all used in the Chang/Gruner study) to reinforce the "cover story" given for the experiment. The speaker was also rated on the McCroskey ethos scales and six other semantic differential-type scales used in both the previous study and the Stocking-Zillman experiment. The data from these scales were all subjected to a 2 X 2 factorial analysis of variance, using the SPSS. These analyses, thus, tested for any main effect from either humor or ethos manipulation and any interaction effect between these two independent variables.

Results

Stimulus Validation. The ethos manipulation worked, but only for the authoritativeness dimension (which would be expected). Means differed a small but significant amount, 4.73 and 5.17, $F = 5.282$, $p < .024$. Humor had no effect on the authoritativeness means. Character means seem not affected by either the ethos or humor treatments, although the means by humor did differ in the "expected" direction (higher for the humor-user, as in previous studies); those means were 4.96 and 5.15 for non-humor and humor, respectively, $F = 1.575$, $p < .213$. The humor manipulation worked, also. The "funny" means were

3.08 and 4.35 for the non-humorous and humorous versions, respectively ($F = 30.076$, $p < .001$).

"Main Results". Upheld was the theory that the speakers using mildly self-deprecating wit would be rated higher on "sense of humor" and "wittiness" regardless of ethos level and, again, without damaging ethos ratings. The "sense of humor" means (on a 3-point scale) were 1.62 and 2.43 for the nonhumor and humor versions, respectively ($F = 33.976$, $p < .0001$). The "wittiness" means (on a 7-point scale) were 3.84 and 5.02 for the nonhumor and humor versions, respectively ($F = 25.098$, $p < .0001$).

Of Interest. The 2 X 2 ANOVA was run for each individual scale as well as for those summed for character and authoritativeness. One interesting result is that there may have been a main effect for humor on the honest/dishonest scale. The humorous speakers were rated half a point higher in "honesty," on the average (means of 5.16 and 5.62, $F = 3.838$, $p < .053$).

Interaction. No interaction effects between humor and ethos occurred. This may be because of the small actual difference in ethos, and that on only the authoritativeness dimension.

Discussion

It would appear from the data of this study and that of the Chang/Gruner study that the textbook writers who admonish speakers to use mildly self-disparaging humor are correct. These studies indicate that a speaker can enhance his "image" with humor/wit without damage to the traditional factors of ethos.

Experiment 2

Since Experiment 1 used witty remarks deprecating the speaker's professional field rather than the speaker himself, a replication was conducted using material more humorous than witty[10] and deprecating more of self than

one's professional field. Also, a wider difference in initial speaker ethos manipulation was attempted.

Stimuli. A speech on "Why Everyone Should Read The Bible" was constructed, based upon a sermon used in a previous study.[11] In half the cases the speech was attributed to a convicted felon who made the speech as part of a GED speech course in federal prison (low ethos source); in the other half of the cases, the speech was attributed to a former honors student, now a 3rd-year law student (high ethos source). Half of each set of speeches contained self-deprecating humor such as, "Why, before I became a student of the Bible I thought the Epistles were the wives of the Apostles; I thought that Sodom and Gomorrah were brother and sister!"[12]

Subjects. University speech students were randomly handed one of the 4 versions of the speech. Thirty-one read the low ethos/humor speech; 32 read the low ethos/no humor speech; 25 read the high ethos/humor speech; and 33 read the high ethos/no humor speech. Ss responded to the same scales as used in Experiment 1.

Results

Stimulus Validation. The ethos manipulation worked, but, as in Experiment 1, only for "authoritativeness." The mean ratings for low and high ethos, respectively, were 28.79 and 31.76 for authoritativeness ($F = 12.214$, $p < .001$ in the 2 X 2 ANOVA). The humor manipulation worked, also; the "funniness" ratings for the humor and non-humor versions, respectively, were 4.23 and 3.58 ($F = 9.041$, $p < .003$). Neither ethos nor humor manipulation had an effect on speaker "character" ratings.

Main Results. Once again, the speakers using humor were rated higher on "wittiness" and "sense of humor." The "witty" mean ratings for humor and no-humor, respectively, were 4.55 and 3.60 ($F = 13.876$, $p < .001$). The "sense of humor" mean ratings (again, on a 3-point scale) for the humor and no-humor speeches, respectively, were 2.54 and 1.83 ($F = 33.368$, $p < .000$). However,

Experiment 2 produced a result not found in Experiment 1. Whereas Experiment 1 found that enhanced speaker ratings of wittiness and sense of humor resulted from the witticisms but without producing negative ratings of ethos, Experiment 2 shows that use of humor lowered the ratings of authoritativeness (means of 31.20 and 29.07 for the no-humor and humor versions, respectively; $F = 12.214$, $p < .001$).

Interaction. No interaction effects occurred in any of the 2 X 2 factorial ANOVAs.

Discussion. It is interesting that the ethos manipulation operated only on the authoritativeness dimension and not on the character dimension of credibility. This might be explained by the topic of the speech used; it may be that the Ss felt that anyone who advocates the reading of the Holy Bible has suitable character, although the alleged difference in speakers' educational status could account for the different authoritativeness ratings. This explanation is enhanced by the data from the "intelligent/stupid" scale from the Stocking/Zillman and subsequent studies. The low ethos source was rated as less intelligent (more stupid); means of 4.81 and 5.71, $F = 23.051$, $p < .000$).

At least two possible explanations of why the humor in Experiment 1 did not damage authoritativeness ratings and that in Experiment 2 did offer themselves: one is the degree of self-deprecation of the humor in the two studies, and, second, the difference in kind of the humor in the studies.

To test the first explanation, the humor/witty items from the three speeches in the Chang/Gruner and Experiments 1 and 2 studies were arranged in four different random orders and presented to 42 students from the same population as that of the previous studies. The Ss were to rate the items on a 7-point semantic differential-type scale bounded by "self-disparaging" and "self-applauding." The ratings of each of the three sets of humor materials

(psychologist-deprecating, economist-deprecating, and self-deprecating) were summed and a one-way ANOVA was performed on the three sets of data. The means of the three sets of ratings did not differ significantly ($F = 1.005$). Apparently the stimuli did not differ in degree of deprecation.

The second explanation is probably more valid. The "economist" and "psychologist" stimuli were more wit than humor---clever wordplay, to say in a fresh way things about these academicians that we already know in more "factual," common language. Also, they deprecate in a more oblique, indirect way by referring to economists and psychologists in general and not directly to the specific speaker.

On the other hand, the "Bible" stimuli were more humorous, having less an intellectual and more of a "childish play" element; they directly referred to the speaker's ignorance and stupidity, comic-book-reading, and the like. The humor may have been perceived as more "silly" and less cerebral. The validity of this explanation is bolstered by another item of data, and an earlier study.

On the "intelligent/stupid" scale mentioned above, the humor had a significant main effect: means of 5.48 and 4.96 for the no-humor and humor groups, respectively, obtained, with $F = 6.412$, $p < .013$. And Goodchilds[13] found that discussants verified as "clowning wits" were rated as low in influence but high in popularity, whereas the obverse was found for "sarcastic wits." The witty "psychologist" and "economist" may have been perceived as more influential (authoritative) and the humorous "Bible speaker" was perceived as more clownish (less influential or authoritative).

Experiments 1 and 2 compared the effects of wit/humor disparaging of self or speaker discipline with no wit/humor. These experiments and their results suggested another question: "Does it make a difference in speaker impact if the wit/humor is directed at self (or "own-profession" or at others) (or,

"other's-profession"). The only other test of this question was the previously-cited Stocking-Zillman study which used as simuli nothing but self- and other-deprecating humor. Therefore, Experiment 3 was conducted.

Experiment 3

Stimuli. The speech, "Why I Chose Psychology," used in the previous studies mentioned above, served as the stimulus. In two versions of the speech, late in the text, a paragraph contained all the previously-used witticisms directed against either (1) psychology/psychologists or (2) economics/economists, producing self- and other-deprecating wit. A control version of the speech omitted the witticisms altogether.

Subjects. Again, students at the University of Georgia were randomly assigned to read a version of the speech and respond on response measures provided. In November, 1984, 31 students read the self-disparaging version; 29 read the economist- (other-)disparaging version; and 29 read the control version.

Response Measures. The response measures were used the same as used in Experiments 1 and 2.

Results

The data were subjected to a one-way analysis of variance. Both speakers using wit were rated significantly higher than the control speaker on "funniness" ($F = 11.93$, $p < .000$), "sense of humor" ($F = 14.48$, $p < .000$), and "wittiness" ($F = 7.428$, $p < .001$). Where significant F scores were found, the Scheffé method, of course, was used to compare two means at a time. No significant differences were found on any other response measures.

It may be that we can conclude that, if used sparingly and in good taste, disparaging wit may be used successfully by speakers whether that wit disparages self or others.

Footnotes

[1]Wilma H. Grimes, A Theory of Humor for Public Address. Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Illinois, 1953.

[2]P.E. Lull, "The Effects of Humor in Persuasive Speech," Speech Monographs, 7 (1940), 26-40.

[3]Many of these studies are summarized in Charles R. Gruner, Understanding Laughter: The Workings of Wit and Humor (Chicago: The Nelson-Hall Co., 1978).

[4]A eulogy quoting the wit/humor of the eulogized deceased can even enhance a eulogizer's ethos, according to James Vincent, "The Impact of Humor on Speaker Credibility in Funeral Eulogies," an as-yet unpublished manuscript.

[5]For instance, see James Larry Powell, Ego Involvement: A Mediating Factor in Satirical Persuasion. Ph.D. Dissertation, The University of Florida, 1975, and his "Topic Salience and Responses to the Source of Satirical Messages," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 44 (Fall, 1978), 60-72.

[6]Robert M. Kaplan and Gregory C. Pascoe, "Humorous Lectures and Humorous Examples: Some Effects Upon Comprehension and Retention," Journal of Educational Psychology, 69 (Fed., 1977), 61-65.

[7]Avner Ziv, "Cognitive Results of Using Humor in Teaching," Paper Presented at The Third International Conference on Humor, Washington, D.C., August 28, 1982.

[8]S. Holly Stocking and Dolf Zillman, "Effects of Humorous Disparagement of Self, Friend, and Enemy," Psychology Reports, 39 (1976), 455-61.

[9]Mei-Jung Chang and Charles R. Gruner, "Audience Reaction to Self-Disparaging Humor," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 46 (Summer, 1981), 419-26.

[10]For a discussion of how a case can be made for a "humor-wit" continuum, and how these entities correspond to poetic and rhetoric, see Charles R. Gruner, "Is Wit to Humor What Rhetoric is to Poetic?" Central States Speech Journal, 38 (February, 1965), 17-22, or Gruner, Understanding Laughter, Chapter 5.

[11]Charles R. Gruner and William E. Lampton, "Effects of Including Humorous Material in a Persuasive Sermon," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 38 (Winter, 1972), 188-96.

[12]Copies of the speeches used in the Chang/Gruner study and Experiments 1 and 2 reported here may be obtained by writing Charles R. Gruner, Department of Speech Communication, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602.

[13]Jacqueline D. Goodchilds, "Effects of Being Witty on Position in the Social Structure of a Small Group," Sociometry, 22 (September, 1959), 261-71.